JEAN DE MEUN, THE VOLTAIRE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

BY
DOROTHY MARIE RALPH
A.B., Carthage College, 1930
A.M., University of Illinois, 1931

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
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The title of this study is drawn from Gaston Paris' remarks on the *Roman de la Rose* in which he calls Jean de Meun, the author of its second and longer portion, "le Voltaire du moyen âge." To determine in what measure Gaston Paris is justified in such a comparison is the problem considered.

To compare Jean de Meun as the spokesman of the thirteenth century with Voltaire is a task which requires some study in the backgrounds of the two authors. Historically in France the thirteenth century was a period in which the power of the king was increasing at the expense of that of great nobles. Although France was evolving as a national and political unit, social and economic conditions within the kingdom were deplorable in many respects. The authority of the king extended little beyond his own domain, and roving bands of thieves wrought havoc in outlying districts. Famines and pestilence did not fail to leave their mark on the people, particularly on the lower classes who suffered cruelly under the domination of the nobles. During the crusades, however, many serfs succeeded in buying their freedom, and the rise of towns and communes was a movement concurrent with the increase in number and importance of the bourgeois group. The Church enjoyed great prestige, but the level of morality among the clergy had declined. The thirteenth century witnessed the founding of the mendicant orders whose members overran France and whom Jean de Meun considered the greatest scourge of his day. The poet is outstanding in allying himself with the forces of enlightenment and in combatting superstition, the chief obstacle to progress.

The *Roman de la Rose* is a literary milestone in the thirteenth century. Its first portion, written by Guillaume de Lorris, exemplifies the "courtois" ideal in literature. In his continuation of the allegorical love poem Jean de Meun is the exponent of the bourgeois tradition in his satirical picture of society. His work is full of pedantry and is a veritable catalogue of medieval knowledge; in this respect it is typical of the works of popularization which characterized its century.

Virtually nothing is known about the author of the second part of the *Roman de la Rose.* A few meager details are given in the poem, and from internal evidence one may guess that he finished writing before 1282. From tax records it would seem that Jean de Meun was still alive in 1305, but details of his life are almost completely lacking.

The background for Voltaire's writing is the eighteenth century with its gradual decline in absolutism both in Church and State. Social and economic conditions in the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries are comparable in that peasants and bourgeoisie bore the brunt of the burden. While Versailles flourished in dazzling but unstable splendor, the lot of the peasant was hard, and the bourgeoisie resented increasingly the exemption from taxation enjoyed by nobility and churchmen. The spirit of revolt culminated in a great social and political upheaval—the Revolution.

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Although the battle for the possession of the Rose, which symbolizes the love of a girl, is the main theme of the *Roman de la Rose,* the digressions which frequently take the form of criticism of society are more important. One of the most lengthy digressions is that in which Jean de Meun condemns the mendicant friars. While Voltaire criticizes the Church generally as it existed in the eighteenth century, Jean de Meun limits his remarks to the begging friars. Their hypocrisy, greed, duplicity, chicanery, cruelty, and indolence feel the lash of his stinging satire, and although he occasionally lapses into what on the surface may seem to be an apology for his lack of deference to the friars, his fearlessness in disclosing the vices of the mendicants is a credit to the thirteenth century freedom of expression.

He warns the Church that the friars are undermining her very foundations, and presents a very gloomy picture of the future condition of the Church if the destructive influence of the mendicants is not cast out. Jean de Meun regards the University of Paris as the last stronghold of Christianity, and praises its efforts to free itself from the domination of the monks.

To express his opinion of the mendicants Jean de Meun has created the character of Faus Semblant who is a direct ancestor of Molière's Tartuffe. In company with Astenance Contrainte he joins the host of the God of Love. Faus Semblant prefers the monkish habit as a cloak

for his evil deeds, and he speaks with authority of the vices and abuses of the mendicants. Jean de Meun condemns the institution of monasticism as unnatural and unreasonable in its practice of celibacy.

Both Jean de Meun and Voltaire saw the needs of their respective centuries in regard to the institution of monasticism. Voltaire's objections to monks and nuns are largely based on the utilitarian philosophy of the eighteenth century. His denunciation of monasticism has no connection with its damaging effects upon the Church, but rather with its disastrous influence upon society. For him monasticism has failed to vindicate its usefulness to society. His is a more pointed and clever satire than that of Jean de Meun, but the latter writer forcefully portrays monasticism as one of the greatest evils of his time.

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Political conditions are reflected in the work of Jean de Meun in his remarks on kings and nobles and the origin of kingship. His portrayal of the first king is indeed a bold stroke for his own day, or for any period in which the power of kings was held in high repute. The important attribute of early kings he points out as brute force, not wisdom. External splendor brings no peace of mind, and kings are less to be envied than the "ribaut" who faces life with a carefree attitude. Jean de Meun depicts kings as subject to their royal office, the need for which arose when man departed from his life of primitive simplicity. In this line of thought Jean de Meun is more the spiritual ancestor of Rousseau than of Voltaire. The poet reduces kings to the level of the common man by pointing to the folly of the superstition that comets and extraordinary celestial displays foretell the death of king or prince. In this respect he anticipates Bayle and Fontenelle.

For Jean de Meun the pretenses of the nobility are without significance. He makes true nobility dependent on real worth—it is not a part of the inheritance which a man may transmit to his children along with his wealth. In this regard Jean de Meun may lay claim to a place among the moderns.

Voltaire's criticism of kings is more frequently unfavorable than flattering, although for the sake of self-preservation flattery is not absent from his works. Unlike Jean de Meun, he uses many examples from his own day. He does not hesitate to point out the faults of various kings

as he calls them by name, but he evinces sincere admiration for Louis XIV. He, too, is preoccupied with the idea of equality of all men—equality before the law—which is closely bound up with his conception of justice as it should be administered. The pretenses of the nobility he considers ridiculous. Voltaire's disillusioning stay at the court of Frederick of Prussia completely relieved him of all optimism in regard to kings.

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In Jean de Meun's presentation of social evils of his day, greed and poverty loom large. Greed arises from a lack of love for one's fellow men, and the poet graphically portrays the anxiety which it brings. A large portion of Jean de Meun's criticism of monasticism is based on economic considerations—he condemns the mendicants as parasites of society. Merchants, usurers, doctors, lawyers, and judges are criticized for their avarice and venality. No gruesome detail is lacking in the poet's picture of Poverty and Hunger, forerunners of crime. Sufficiency and a life of simplicity are praised at the expense of great wealth.

Voltaire's social and economic criticism is wider in scope than that of Jean de Meun. While the thirteenth century poet's criticism of judges in its bitterness is second only to his condemnation of the mendicants, Voltaire treats various social groups with equal irony. He is especially lavish, however, in his scorn of the medical profession for its failure to serve society. His ideas of justice are elaborated more fully than those of Jean de Meun. The thirteenth century poet freely criticizes social evils, but he offers no solution to the problems arising from existing conditions. Voltaire goes a step further in putting into practice some of his social theories in his flourishing community at Ferney.

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Using the Friend, the Old Woman, Nature, and Genius as his spokesmen, Jean de Meun treats the question of women at such length that this portion of his work becomes repetitious and tedious. His point of view on the subject is cynical and pessimistic, and he is unsparing in his satirical picture of the faults of women. But he takes no direct responsibility for his censure of women—he carefully puts his criticism on the lips of his characters. Occasionally, however, he finds it necessary

to offer an apology to good women, and in his poem there is some affirmation of the equality of the two sexes. At the heart of the work of Jean de Meun lies the encouragement of the perpetuation of the race, and for this purpose he finds the orthodox institution of marriage inadequate.

In the writings of Voltaire there is much less attention paid to women and marriage than in the verses of his thirteenth century forebear. In Voltaire's century women had advanced to a position of greater importance than that which they enjoyed in Jean de Meun's day. The literary salons of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witness this fact. A large portion of Voltaire's life was passed in the company of women, but women and the psychology of love find little place in his writings. The sole justification for Jean de Meun's having written at such length about women is perhaps the fact that women were frequently the object of ridicule in bourgeois literature. For the sake of greater appeal to his bourgeois audience Jean de Meun holds with this tradition. Voltaire retains enough of the thirteenth century bourgeois spirit to cause him to refer slightingly to women, but he sees no necessity to make women and their failings one of the major issues of his work. Voltaire is much less cynical than Jean de Meun, and his references to women are inclined to take the form of short, ironic sentences. He exposes infidelity, immorality, selfishness, and ingratitude, but he does not make of them an important question in his writing.

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After consideration of the problem of Jean de Meun, "le Voltaire du moyen âge," one may say that Gaston Paris is justified in his comparison of the two authors. Although they lived in different ages, they are alike in that they deal with the main problems of society and that they are champions of liberty in political and social life. Satire is the most powerful weapon of both authors in their war on corruption in Church and State and in their disclosure of social injustice. Man and his welfare are the chief preoccupation of both men. Both Jean de Meun and Voltaire are outstanding as popularizers of knowledge, and both head the ranks of enlightenment in their respective centuries. As to style of writing, Jean de Meun lacks the subtlety and lightness of touch which characterize Voltaire, but he is unsurpassed in the caustic quality of his satire. For two centuries after his death, the author of the second portion of the *Roman de la Rose* exerted a powerful influence, and the influence of Voltaire is one of the outstanding heritages from the eighteenth century.

VITA

Dorothy Marie Ralph was born in Quincy, Illinois, January 12, 1909. A graduate of the Princeton Township High School in 1926, she entered Carthage College from which she was graduated with the A. B. degree in June, 1930. The year 1930-31 she spent in graduate study in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Illinois from which she received the A. M. degree in June, 1931. Since September, 1931, she has been an assistant in French at the University of Illinois where she has continued her graduate work in French, Spanish, and English. She has attended the courses of Professors Balseiro, Carnahan, Hamilton, Hillebrand, Michaud, Oliver, and Will. To each she wishes to express her gratitude, especially to Professor Oliver who suggested the title of this dissertation and under whose direction it has been completed.

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